The Stray Cat Leaves with the Spring Breeze

Ballad Kitaguni
Translated by Vish

The nameless days left at memory's end.

Chapter 1

He began by opening the blinds and letting the light from the window spill in. The ashtray was empty. The scent of cigarette smoke lingered on the walls, but the room itself had been kept clean. Still, in the disarray of the bookshelf, or the slightly off-angle desk lamp, there were faint traces of someone's life. The chair was left pulled out from the desk. The computer was shut down. A bottle of liquor, placed in the shade, had about a glassful left. Looking closer, he saw a few strands of blue-gray fur floating on the surface.

"So he did it again," Illuso muttered, catching on immediately.

Until that morning, the room had served as Formaggio's temporary hideout. The spare key had not been left with Illuso so he could prepare bruschetta while his partner was away and greet him with, "Easy job, huh? Let's have a drink—it's on you, though." No, it was because as per standard procedure, Illuso had been designated as

Formaggio's " successor." If a "what if" situation occurred, the next person in line would handle the cleanup for the comrade who had failed. And this time, the "what if" had happened. That was all there was to it.

Illuso powered on the computer and waited. Information about the Boss's daughter and her bodyguards would be sent here once the location was confirmed. After receiving it, Illuso would delete all emails and data from the computer. That would complete both the handover and the cleanup.

While he waited, he checked the room's trash bin. As expected, not a scrap of paper remained. They were professional gangsters. And someone from Risotto's team, whose very profession was assassination, would never leave without at least cleaning up after themselves. All Illuso was doing was a final double-check.

However, if there was one thing that bothered him—

As he pushed the trash bin back under the desk, he noticed movement in the shadows. What came first wasn't surprise, but exasperation. He immediately knew it wasn't an enemy. He could see the same blue-gray fur that had been floating in the liquor bottle.

A cat.

It could have been a Chartreux, but it lacked the elegance of a pedigree. Its eyes, a sharp glint of moonlight, had the wildness of a stray. But maybe because the blinds had been closed, the pupils were round and soft. Their eyes met. Illuso let out a sigh.

"I had a feeling when I saw the bottle… Damn it, Formaggio. You left it behind."

Of all the things to leave, he had chosen the most obvious trace. The silence hung for about five seconds. Then the cat gave a single meow.

Illuso ran a hand through his hair and sighed again. Even now, he was being saddled with this cat.

No—maybe it had always been this way. One way or another, Illuso had ended up dealing with this cat because of Formaggio. He just hadn't expected that to continue after the man was gone. Leaning against the edge of the desk, Illuso drew in a long breath. The stale scent of tobacco, soaked into the wallpaper, filled his lungs. He looked down at the large, undeniable remnant left behind in the vacant room.

He had first met the cat after finishing a job with Formaggio. If he remembered correctly, it had been a cloudy night.

Chapter 2

"There were all those detailed reminders in our orders, but turns out we didn't need your useless ability after all… huh, Formaggio?"
"You're full of it. As if you could've gotten that hand mirror into the target's room all by yourself."
A stone-paved alley lit by a hazy glow. The two assassins, Illuso and Formaggio, walked down it at a steady pace.
"Seriously though, Formaggio, that jacket of yours really isn't suited for an assassin… you ought to stop wearing it. I'm not saying it stands out, you know? But when you shrink to such a tiny size and start scurrying around in that thing, from behind you look like a damn ladybug."
Whenever Illuso saw Formaggio using his ability on himself, he

couldn't help but tease him. Formaggio was used to it by now, though he always looked annoyed.
"Shut the hell up already! My jacket's way cooler than that marshmallow-ass vest you wear. Why does this guy always become a loudmouth when the job goes smoothly?"
While they might head to a scene with multiple members as backup, assassins wielding the uncanny fangs known as Stands typically didn't require anyone else's help to perform the assassination itself. However, in special cases, such as when extreme stealth was required, they would sometimes pair up. That ability to work together was the team's strength, and the combination of Man in the Mirror and Little Feet was put to full use.
And so, that night's job ended more easily than boiling macaroni, and the two walked triumphantly back down the nighttime streets with relaxed steps.
"I've already sent in the report to Risotto… but looks like we missed dinner," Formaggio said, pausing his humming of *Volevo un gatto nero [1]* and turning around. "Let's grab a bite and a drink while we're at it. Bar PIENO's close by, right? They've got that grilled mushroom dish, it's cheap and damn good…"
"I'll pass."
The bar they were talking about was one they'd been going to often lately, but Illuso shook his head. "The job was too easy. I'm not really in the mood to eat. Go by yourself."
"Whaaat? What's up with you? Weren't you into that waitress at the place? The one who looked like Britney Spears… Wait—no way."
Seeing Illuso grimace, Formaggio knew he'd hit the mark. He threw a hand to his forehead and looked dramatically up at the overcast night sky, laughing.
"Wahahaha! Are you serious?! I told you, didn't I? Don't try to act like a smartass when you're hitting on a girl! Even without that, you already talk like you're trying to one-up everyone… Women pick up on the way guys try to make themselves look bigger, and they think it's lame as hell, y'knoooow!"
"Shut the hell up! Like you're one to talk! And for the record, any woman who wears perfume that smells like a toilet at Napoli Station was never my type to begin with!"
"Sheeeesh, guess it can't be helped! Let's hit up a different bar for a

consolation party. You're buying. Let's call it your cheer-up tax, yeah?"
"Screw off, dumbass! You're the one who—"
"Wait a sec."
Cutting off his own words, Formaggio turned his ear toward the stillness of the night. Illuso was still irritated, but he followed suit almost immediately. When a teammate signaled caution, flipping the switch into alert mode was second nature for an assassin. A strange voice echoed off the rows of concrete walls. At first, Illuso thought it was the drunken shouting of an old woman. But as he listened more closely, he realized it was the growl of an animal.

"It came from this way… that voice came from over here."
"Hey, Formaggio…"
Illuso followed as Formaggio walked toward the source of the voice, winding through the narrow alleys packed between cheap apartment buildings and restaurants. Pushing aside a pile of garbage, they emerged into a vacant lot, roughly 130 square meters in size.

"Whoa."

For a moment, golden eyes flashed in the darkness, then several small shadows darted past Illuso's feet. A group of stray cats. They'd probably made this spot their gathering place, drawn by the kitchen scraps tossed out by the nearby restaurants.

That explained it. Thinking back, the voice they'd heard earlier really had been the cats meowing. Illuso looked to the back of the lot and saw Formaggio crouched down, staring at something.

"What is that filthy thing?"
Peering over, he saw something breathing in the dark.
It was a cat after all. Hard to see clearly in the low light, but it was wounded. Patches of its dull blue-gray fur were soaked with blood.
"A stray cat lynching? Pretty damn brutal…" Illuso spat with disgust.
Just as the body has mechanisms to expel foreign matter, so too does

an organization. Even in the world of cats, there are packs—systems—and if one is cast out, it gets purged. He couldn't help but think of their own situation; despite being members of Passione, they'd been increasingly shoved to the sidelines ever since the Sorbet and Gelato incident.

Come to think of it, the reason their mission that night had been carried out so cautiously as a two-man team was likely because of one underlying concern: *"The team now must not, under any circumstances, allow the boss's orders to be delayed."* They had rebellious thoughts, but no means to act on them. If they drew the wrong kind of attention, it wouldn't be surprising if the entire team was wiped out.

And so, despite not being particularly fond of cats, perhaps that wounded stray cat, which was like a miniature symbol of alienation within an organization, struck a chord in Illuso. Formaggio was silent for a while. In the darkness, he ran his fingers along the cat's fur, as if feeling around for something. Illuso thought, *What's he supposed to figure out from that? It's not like he's a vet.*
But then, a few moments later—
"Sheesh, guess it can't be helped."
When Formaggio stood up with the cat in his arms, two thoughts came to Illuso at the same time: *Is this guy serious?* and *Come to think of it... yeah, that makes sense.*
"…Hey. What the hell are you doing, Formaggio?"
"Well, sheesh, it can't be helped, right? It's injured."
—That's right. Formaggio had always been a cat person.
So much for grabbing drinks. On the way home from a mission that ended easily, they found themselves carrying one more burden—or rather, one more cat.

Chapter 3

A few days had passed since that night with the cat. Illuso had gone to return a CD he'd borrowed—Jamiroquai, if he remembered right

—but when he visited Formaggio's hideout, he tripped over a bottle lying on the floor and got hurt. Before he could even utter a complaint, he noticed that the bottle was unusually heavy. Looking closer, he saw that a cat was stuffed inside. It was the same cat Formaggio had brought back the other day.

Seeing the cat packed into a narrow-mouthed bottle like some kind of magic trick, Illuso immediately understood what had happened.

"That's seriously messed up… You're using your Stand to bully a cat?"

"I'm not bullying it. Don't make me sound so bad."

Formaggio, sitting in a chair, turned listlessly toward him. On the desk was a fashion magazine featuring a leather goods special from this month, the model on the cover torn up by claws. Even understanding the circumstances, for Illuso—who neither liked nor disliked animals—the bottled punishment disturbed him on a level beyond just feeling sorry for the cat. It felt too weird to simply set down a bottle with a cat stuffed inside, so instead, he carefully broke the bottle and let it out.

"HISSS!"

The cat lunged to bite Formaggio with a hiss full of fury. Formaggio casually lifted his leg to dodge. To Illuso, he looked oddly satisfied.

"Hey, are you the type of guy who ties up the girl he's dating or something?" Illuso asked, and Formaggio frowned.

"Don't stick some nasty label on me. It can't be helped, y'know? I

had to teach it not to do that. Every time I bring home a magazine, it automatically turns into a shredder. It's not like I'm hitting it or choking it or anything…"

"I'm no expert on training animals, but stuffing it in a bottle seems a little messed up, don't you think? Well… it seems to be handling it better than I thought. Gotta hand it to strays, they've got nerves of steel."

"Don't lump it in with some pampered Persian cat owned by some nouveau riche hag on Church Street. And anyway, this ain't '*training* .' I'm not trying to *train* it. I'm just showing it through action that it's not supposed to do that, since it doesn't understand words."

Isn't that what 'training' is? Illuso thought.

When Formaggio reached out, the cat swiped at him with its paw and darted away. It ran straight to Illuso, who was still kneeling on the floor, and climbed onto his thigh.

"Ah—!"

He wasn't used to dealing with animals. Illuso looked up at Formaggio in confusion. Formaggio stared back, frowning at the sight of Illuso being used as a cushion.

"You've gotta be kidding me. It's all over you! It's never even done that to me! What, you got some catnip hidden in your pants or something?"

"Hell no, dumbass! …Damn it, it's getting comfy… This thing

probably thinks my lap's some high-end Cassina sofa or something."

"I've always kinda respected that about you—how the hell do lines that shameless come out of your mouth so naturally? At best it's a camp chair."

Their back-and-forth was pointless as always, but truthfully, Illuso wasn't that bothered at the time. A cat that didn't warm up to Formaggio was curled up on him instead. There was a bit of smug satisfaction in that, and the warmth of the small animal was actually pleasant.

Until he noticed that the spot where the cat was sitting was a little too warm.

"…Huh? That's weird… I mean, I know small animals give off heat, but this is a bit much… And there's kind of a weird smell…"

"Ah!"

The moment Illuso raised his voice, the cat leapt off his lap. On his pants, where the cat had been sitting, there was a wet spot.

"Y-you've gotta be fucking kidding me, you little bastard! Do you have any idea how much these down pants cost?!"

" Hyahahahah ! It really got you, huh? But y'know, they say when a cat pisses on you, it's not 'cause it hates you. It means it likes you! I heard it's trying to mark you with its scent!"

As Formaggio offered this carefree explanation, Illuso glared at him with bloodshot eyes. He grabbed a towel from Formaggio's room

and wiped off his pants, muttering that he wouldn't let this go. Still, he was more worried about whether the smell would sink in.

But as he cleaned up the cat's urine, a new irritation hit him.

"…Ugh—itchy! My hand's itching! Don't tell me it's fleas?!"

"Well yeah, it's a stray. I mean, I haven't treated it or anything. I'm a little itchy too."

"You idiot! If you're gonna keep it, at least get rid of the damn fleas! They've got everything for that! Flea collars and stuff—"

"Oh, a collar. A collar, huh."

Formaggio glanced toward the corner where the wall met the ceiling, then looked back at Illuso and said, "I'm not putting a collar on it."

His tone wasn't much different from earlier. But in that moment, there was unmistakable resolve in Formaggio's voice. Precisely because they were always trading sarcastic remarks and insults, Illuso could immediately tell when Formaggio had switched into his *"this is serious"* tone.

Formaggio continued. "I'm not putting a collar on it. I'm not keeping it as a pet. If it heals up completely and decides to leave, that's fine. I'm not gonna stop it."

"…Tch."

Illuso avoided responding. As fellow assassins, they both understood

that they could lose their temper at any moment. That's why, even when they traded banter and hurled insults, they respected the *unspoken line* that kept things from turning serious. Illuso stood up and headed for the door. Formaggio called out to his back.

"Hey, hey, hey—my bad, alright? I'll cover the cleaning bill, so stick around and have some cheese or something."

Without turning around, Illuso replied, "I'm going to buy the flea spray. You're the one paying for it."

"Then… pick up something to eat while you're at it. I'll pay. Oh! And get some cheap canned food for the cat too."

Chapter 4

From then on, Illuso ended up dealing with trouble every time he visited Formaggio. Sometimes from the cat, but more often than not, from Formaggio's behavior.

Getting peed on was the least of it. His down vest had its stuffing pulled out, his braids were soaked in drool, and sometimes, because Formaggio bullied the cat, it would take it out on Illuso by biting him. He complained to Formaggio every time, but in the end, Illuso was always the one who dealt with the mess.

"Hey, Formaggio. Even if you're not technically keeping it, if you like the cat, the least you could do is look up how to take care of it. Why the hell am I the one researching how to get rid of pee smell or hunting for cardboard that's good for scratching?"

“Well, come on… I’m a gangster, right? You think I can just go buy pet magazines around the neighborhood?”

“Don’t give me that spoiled crap, asshole. At least go ask someone who knows what they’re doing.”

“And who the hell would that be? You really think there’s anyone around guys like us who’d know how to take care of a cat? I mean, Ghiaccio, just look at his personality…”

“…What about Prosciutto? Kind of unexpected, but maybe?”

“…Huuuuh?!”

“I mean, he’s actually pretty good at looking after people, right? And when he calms Pesci down, he always strokes his chin. Doesn’t that kind of make him look like some geezer doting on a fat cat? Hahahaha. ‘Pesci, Pesci, Pesci, ohhh Pesci~~’ …or something like that.”

“Pfft! Idiot! What if he actually is really good with cats? I wouldn’t be able to look at his face without laughing!”

Yeah, those were troublesome days. Troublesome, but sometimes they laughed like idiots. Their team had fallen from grace, and their pay was low. No one ever said it to their faces, but there was always a heavy, gloomy sense that people were pointing fingers behind their backs, saying, “Those guys pulled some stupid stunt, got chewed out by the boss, and now they’re lying low like kids who just got smacked.”

Even so, there were small moments when they forgot all the chaos

and laughed their heads off. Those days went on for a while—until one night, when a dazzling moonlight signaled that change had come.

Chapter 5

After finishing dinner with Formaggio at a bar, Illuso dropped by his place for another round of drinks and noticed the night breeze drifting in. A cup and a book had toppled over on the desk. The window was half open.

Formaggio muttered, "I shut the window when I left… but I guess I didn't lock it."

With a chair used as a foothold, small items scattered around, and an open window, it was easy to picture the path that cat had taken. It had never really warmed up to them, and Formaggio hadn't been keeping it as a pet either. A day like this had always been foreseeable. Still, there was one thing that bothered him. It was too soon.

"Was that cat's wound really fully healed?"

Formaggio shook his head. "I actually had a vet I know take a look at it once… The wound was pretty deep, and it could still reopen if it moves around too much. The bone was damaged too… That cat's cheeky, but it's smart. It messed around a bit, but never thrashed hard enough to get itself killed."

Illuso frowned and looked at Formaggio. "They say cats disappear

when they sense death coming…"

Formaggio shook his head again. "That guy's not the type to just give up and think, 'Guess this is it, oh well.' It didn't stay with me because it got attached. It stayed because it understood this was a place it could heal. And…"

"And what?"

"It didn't have that *dejected look* in its eyes. Not like some punk who's hit rock bottom from despair, or a sick old man with one foot in the grave… it never had eyes like that. Not even when I first found it in that vacant lot."

Saying that, Formaggio stepped onto the desk using the chair as a foothold and reached for the window. Then, before Illuso's eyes, his body began to shrink rapidly.

Wide-eyed, Illuso asked, "What are you planning to do?"

"The difference in size means a difference in *perspective* . Humans have a human *perspective* . Cats have a cat's *perspective* . A human's *perspective* won't cut it. I've gotta be the same size as the cat and share its *perspective* if I want to follow its trail."

Illuso was stunned, then exasperated, and let out a sigh. Then, with a hint of mockery, he mimicked the catchphrase of the man in front of him.

"Sheesh… it can't be helped."

Chapter 6

Formaggio tracked the cat's trail from a low vantage point, while the taller Illuso surveyed the area from above. Following the traces, it didn't take long to see that the cat's destination was that vacant lot. Compared to the cloudy night when they had first found it, the scenery under the full moon looked different. The stone-paved road glowed under the moonlight, shining with a clear golden brilliance.

As they neared the lot, Illuso suggested, "I'll use Man in the Mirror." From their time living with it, he had come to understand that cats were far more sensitive to smell than he had expected. The cat had gone out of its way to sneak off. Even from hundreds of meters away, if it caught a human scent on the wind, it could catch on. And if it did, there was a chance it would run.

They entered the mirror world through a shattered windowpane. Formaggio returned to his normal size and walked alongside Illuso. As the city drifted into sleep, the silence of the mirror world grew deeper. Their footsteps echoed through the back alley as the two of them walked toward the moonlight.

When they arrived at the lot, clouds of dust were swirling fiercely. Peering through the window of a nearby building from the mirror world, they looked out over the lot. Sure enough, the cat was there. The moonlight shone like a spotlight on the lot, clearly illuminating the blue-gray fur standing on end. The cat was glaring at a group of strays standing together opposite it. They were the same ones that had ganged up on it that night.

Several cats were already lying on the ground, but it was still outnumbered. At the center stood a black cat with a sleek, panther-like body, seemingly the boss of the whole group.

“Look, Illuso,” Formaggio said.

The blue-gray cat lunged forward and slammed into the smallest of the strays. As the others rushed in, it twisted its body skillfully and evaded them. When it landed, its side tensed with a visible wince. The wound wasn’t fully healed after all. Illuso instinctively tried to jump out of the mirror world, but Formaggio grabbed his shoulder and stopped him.

“Formaggio…”

“That cat came here to settle the score. On its own… This isn’t some desperate act. It didn’t wait for the wound to heal. It chose this full moon night because it believed *tonight* was the time to get revenge.”

As if entranced by something, Formaggio gazed at the stage bathed in moonlight. The cat’s breathing was shallow from the pain of its injury. Yet its eyes were locked on one thing. It glared at the boss black cat, who stood composed as if being protected by the group of strays.

Its own wounds, its remaining strength, the difference in power between itself and the enemy—the cat took all of it into account before making its move. Spotting a brief opening amid the strays pouncing at it from all sides, it broke through the encirclement. The blue-gray shadow charged straight toward the boss cat. Its eyes, gleaming fiercely as they reflected the moonlight, pierced through the darkness like golden arrows, leaving afterimages in their wake.

The cat leapt to circle around, dodging a strike from the boss cat’s raised forepaw. It slipped into the shadows of a building where the moonlight couldn’t reach, melting into the darkness. A cat’s eyes aren’t quick to adjust to differences in light. By going back and forth between the two spaces of light and darkness, it threw off the boss

cat's gaze. More than the healing of its wounds, what the cat needed was the full moon that night as a weapon to overcome being outnumbered. In an instant, it sank its teeth into the boss cat's throat. Take out the leader, and the group collapses. The stray cats' battle ended in a flash.

"…See? You *can* do it," Formaggio murmured quietly.

It had certainly been an impressive display. But rather than watching the cats' every move, Illuso couldn't take his eyes off Formaggio's side profile, who was watching it all intently. Bathed in the brightening moonlight, Formaggio's eyes gleamed brilliantly. Watching Formaggio's eyes that night, Illuso felt as if he had caught a glimpse of a golden dream, reflected in the rebellion [2] the cat had sparked.

Chapter 7

If it were a smoke break, it would've been enough time for one cigarette. That was about how long it took for Illuso to return from the world of memory.

He had already received intel on the Boss's daughter and her destination, and had cleaned up the data on the computer. With the cat in hand, he locked up and stepped outside. He looked back, gazing up at the window of the room. The blinds were closed. That room, now without its owner, Formaggio, was filled only with silent darkness.

"For now, this should do… I guess. The rest is up to you." Illuso lowered the cat he was carrying onto the cobbled sidewalk.

After the fight back then, Formaggio had ended up bringing the cat back with him again and decided to look after it until it recovered. For one reason or another, the cat had just stayed there, leading up to this moment.

A pet might not survive if they are just released into the wild, but in this case, it was a good thing the cat had never really warmed up to them. It still had the sharp instincts of a stray, so he could let it go like this. As he set it down, the cat glanced around casually and started grooming itself on the spot. Illuso swept his hand and went, "shoo, shoo," trying to drive it off, but the cat remained there brazenly.

"What's your deal?"

It wouldn't go if it was told to go. Even after everything, the cat had kept defying Formaggio, and Formaggio would stuff it back into a bottle each time. Yet, the cat never showed any sign of remorse or became docile. It was a cat that never submitted to anyone until the very end, but Illuso had the sense that what Formaggio truly liked was that very refusal to get attached. Even if he treated it roughly or stuffed it in a bottle, the cat's way of life was never to curry favor. What was Formaggio truly projecting onto that behavior?

"...I didn't think he'd be the first to go… No, it would probably be more accurate to say that it began when Sorbet was *sliced into pieces* ."

Once again, Illuso briefly retraced his memories. The team was lost in darkness at the time. Their pride had been broken, they were chained by a collar of fear, and suffered the humiliation of being kept like powerless pets. In the midst of all that, the revelation that " *the Boss has a daughter"* was like moonlight breaking through overcast skies. A single ray of light piercing the stone walls of Passione's

fortress.

But was that light truly a golden guide illuminating the path forward? Or was it merely an illusion, a dazzling glow meant to obscure and mislead?

Either way, if the world moves according to some great "fate," then humans, as nothing more than its slaves, are like sleepers lying defenseless before a fate they're unaware of. And yet, even in sleep, they could still dream golden dreams.

When the rebellion began with the Boss's daughter as the catalyst, it was Formaggio who took the initiative to move first. It was true that his ability, Little Feet, was the best suited for covert operations among the team. But thinking back on it now, maybe there was more to it—

"…Well, whatever."

Illuso started walking. The group escorting the Boss's daughter was headed to Pompeii. The plan to get there first and ambush them was already in place. From here on out, it was Illuso's job. Their enemies were the ones who had taken down Formaggio. There was no doubt that they were dangerous Stand users. Still, Illuso had confidence.

"My Man in the Mirror is an invincible Stand! A bunch of punks who were just screwing around in Naples until recently don't stand a chance… You'd better be watching this, Formaggio. I'll finish the job you left behind."

He started walking. Before long, he stopped and turned around. The sky above was clear. The breeze brushed gently against his cheek. A few words came to mind, but got caught in his throat and faded. He repeated that action a few times, and then finally muttered just one

line:

“…Sheesh, it can’t be helped…”

And with that, Illuso didn’t look back again.

The cat, which had been playing with the leaves dancing in the breeze, glanced over its shoulder at him. Then, with a single “meow,” it too started walking off somewhere.

fine.

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[1] Kuroneko no Tango (Black Cat Tango)
[2] This uses the term “ Gekokujo ”, which refers to someone of a lower position overthrowing someone of a higher position.